

LEADER



FIRE OF MERCY

A Retreat Guide for All Saints' Day and All Souls' Day

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FIRST MEDITATION

DEATH AND JUDGMENT

INTRODUCTION

Every year, the Church offers a plenary indulgence to any Catholic who visits a cemetery and prays for our departed brothers and sisters on All Souls' Day, November 2nd. At the end of every Hail Mary, we ask the Blessed Virgin to “pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death.” And every time we go to Mass, we pray for the dead and ask for God’s grace to help us all die in his friendship. Clearly, Catholic spirituality is not allergic to thinking about death, that separation of the soul from the body that transitions us from this world into the next.

DEATH MATTERS

For anyone who loves, death is a trial. It sparks the pain of loss, the absence of someone loved, and even the sorrow of loneliness. Experiencing this kind of grief in the face of death is healthy—after all, death as we know it flowed from sin and evil; it wasn’t part of God’s original plan for us.

Even Jesus experienced the pain of this grief. The Gospel of John describes how Jesus wept at the tomb of his friend Lazarus. The Gospel of Luke describes how Jesus was so moved at the sight of a widow mourning the death of her only son that he raised the young man back to life—one of the very few miracles he performed on his own initiative, not at someone’s request.


Grief accompanies the death of a loved one, but fear and anxiety—deep, existential anxiety—accompany the approaching death of oneself. We all must face it someday. It is one of the great truths of our existence. It has been central to the development of human culture and civilization, art and literature, philosophy and religion, ever since the dawn of history. Death matters. This is why the Church invites us, gently but insistently, to keep it in mind.

UNVEILING THE MYSTERY

The teaching of Jesus, backed up by his life, crucifixion, and resurrection, unveils much of the mystery behind death. Besides revealing the origin of death—original sin—he also revealed what happens after death. In so doing, he gives us a chance to take the edge off both the grief and the

anxiety that death can stir up. He turned the knowledge of death into an opportunity for enhancing life.

The most important thing Jesus revealed to us about death is that it isn’t the end. Death is not a wall, but a door. Here is how a beautiful prayer from the Mass for the deceased puts it:

 In [Jesus] the hope of blessed resurrection has dawned,
that those saddened by the certainty of dying
might be consoled by the promise of immortality
to come.
Indeed for your faithful, Lord,
life is changed not ended,
and, when this earthly dwelling turns to dust,
an eternal dwelling is made ready for them in
heaven.


—*Roman Missal*
Preface I, Mass for the Dead

With death life is changed, not ended—only Jesus Christ revealed that truth with absolute certainty. We should thank him for it.

But what is the nature of the change? That depends. It depends, basically, on how we choose to live out our life here on earth. And that’s why the first thing that happens after death is judgment.

THE PARTICULAR JUDGMENT

That’s not a word that usually makes us smile. And yet, in his landmark Encyclical Letter *Saved by Hope* Pope Benedict XVI, following the perennial tradition of Catholic spirituality, described the Day of Judgment as “a setting for learning and practicing hope.” How can that be? How can knowing that we will face God’s judgment after we die fill us with hope? To answer that question, we need to reflect a little bit on what this judgment really consists in.

 Technically speaking, most people will face two judgments. The first, the particular judgment, happens immediately after the moment of death, when, as the



Catechism teaches us, “each man receives his eternal retribution in his immortal soul ... in a particular judgment that refers his life to Christ.”

—*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1022

When we die, we go before the judgment seat of our Lord and God, and speak with him about the course of our lives, the choices we made—and he will honor those choices. The decisions we make in this life have a lasting effect on eternity, a real impact on the kind of person we become, and therefore on the destiny of our own souls and the souls of others. Jesus pointed this out in many of his parables. Here’s how St. Paul summed it up:

“[God] will repay everyone according to his works: eternal life to those who seek glory, honor, and immortality through perseverance in good works, but wrath and fury to those who selfishly disobey the truth and obey wickedness.

—Romans 2:6–8

WHEN OUR PERSONAL HISTORY BECOMES SACRED HISTORY

The second judgment is called the last or final judgment. This is what we refer to every Sunday when we pray the Creed, professing our faith that Jesus “will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead.” What’s the difference between this last judgment and the particular judgment we each face after our death?

At the end of time, when we are all gathered before God’s throne, we will be shown the course of human history as a whole; and we will see how all the decisions and actions of each individual (including ourselves) reverberated down through the centuries.

In fact, some theologians argue that the reason for this universal judgment at the end of time, in addition to the personal judgment of each one upon his or her death, is precisely the fact that we will not know the final consequences of our actions—small and large alike—until they play themselves out completely. Like ripples in a lake, every sin and every good deed spreads not only into eternity, but also into the furthest recesses of history.

CONCLUSION: FLAMES OF MERCY

That’s what we mean when we, as Christians, speak of judgment. But it’s important to remember that Christian judgment is not only the story of our own choices and decisions; above all it is the story of the saving action of God in Christ, intervening ever and always to steer the human story (and the story of every human) towards the glory of heaven.

On the Day of Judgment, our Lord will tell us the whole truth about ourselves, and we will discover the whole truth about everyone else. As Jesus himself explained it:

“For there is nothing hidden that will not become visible, and nothing secret that will not be known and come to light.

—Luke 8:17

This means that he will also allow us to see, directly and not through the veil of faith, the amazing redemptive power of his merciful providence, which at the final judgment will right every wrong and inaugurate a new heaven a new earth.

“He will wipe every tear from their eyes, and there shall be no more death mourning, wailing or pain, for the old order has passed away.

—Revelation 21:4

This is why death and judgment, from God’s perspective, as Jesus has revealed to us and as the Church faithfully reminds us, are in a mysterious way expressions of God’s mercy, flames of the purifying and illuminating fire of his love, “a setting for learning and practicing hope.”

- Knowing the truth about death and judgment helps us make sense of life, and it also can help us navigate through the hardships, temptations, and trials of our short earthly journey.
- We know what happens next, thanks to the burning and liberating fire of God’s merciful love.

In the next meditation, we will take some time to reflect on what happens after our definitive encounter with God at the moment of our particular judgment—heaven and hell, other topics that Jesus loved to talk about. But for now, take some time to reflect prayerfully on these two great mysteries that meant so much to Jesus: death and judgment. The following questions and quotations may help your meditation.



QUESTIONS FOR PERSONAL REFLECTION/GROUP DISCUSSION

1. How often have I reflected on the reality of death and judgment, and on what they mean from Christ's perspective? What are some of the reasons why I might not reflect on it so often? Are they good reasons?
2. What kind of reaction does the thought of judgment elicit in my heart and mind? Why? What kind of reaction should it elicit? Why?
3. What would I like to be remembered for in time and in eternity? What would I like Jesus to say to me at my personal judgment?

THREE QUOTATIONS TO HELP YOUR MEDITATION

☞ Then Jesus said to his disciples, "Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me. For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. What profit would there be for one to gain the whole world and forfeit his life? Or what can one give in exchange for his life? For the Son of Man will come with his angels in his Father's glory, and then he will repay everyone according to his conduct.

—Matthew 16:24–27
NABRE

☞ The Christian who unites his own death to that of Jesus views it as a step towards him and an entrance into everlasting life. When the Church for the last time speaks Christ's words of pardon and absolution over the dying Christian, seals him for the last time with a strengthening anointing, and gives him Christ in viaticum as nourishment for the journey, she speaks with gentle assurance:

*Go forth, Christian soul, from this world
in the name of God the almighty Father,
who created you,
in the name of Jesus Christ, the Son of the living
God,
who suffered for you,
in the name of the Holy Spirit,
who was poured out upon you.*

*Go forth, faithful Christian!
May you live in peace this day,
may your home be with God in Zion,
with Mary, the virgin Mother of God,
with Joseph, and all the angels and saints. ...
May you return to [your Creator]
who formed you from the dust of the earth.
May holy Mary, the angels, and all the saints
come to meet you as you go forth from this life. ...
May you see your Redeemer face to face.*

—CCC, 1020

☞ From the earliest times, the prospect of the Judgment has influenced Christians in their daily living as a criterion by which to order their present life, as a summons to their conscience, and at the same time as hope in God's justice. Faith in Christ has never looked merely backwards or merely upwards, but always also forwards to the hour of justice that the Lord repeatedly proclaimed. This looking ahead has given Christianity its importance for the present moment. In the arrangement of Christian sacred buildings, which were intended to make visible the historic and cosmic breadth of faith in Christ, it became customary to depict the Lord returning as a king—the symbol of hope—at the east end; while the west wall normally portrayed the Last Judgment as a symbol of our responsibility for our lives—a scene which followed and accompanied the faithful as they went out to resume their daily routine.

—Pope Benedict XVI
Spe Salvi, 41

NOTES



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SECOND MEDITATION

HEAVEN AND HELL

INTRODUCTION

Every year, the Church celebrates November 1st as a liturgical solemnity called All Saints' Day. It is a holy day of obligation in which every Catholic throughout the entire world attends Mass to worship God and to honor all of our older brothers and sisters in the faith who have made their way home to heaven. That's what "All Saints' Day" refers to—everyone who is already in heaven. Canonized saints have their own feast days throughout the liturgical year. But many other followers of Christ are in heaven, even though the Church has not officially canonized them.


OUR FINAL DESTINATION

Why is remembering the saints so important? Why does the Church call us all to take a break from our busy and demanding earthly activities in order to honor them on All Saint's Day?

There are many reasons. But one reason is especially important. Heaven is real, and it's where we are all supposed to be going. It's our final destination in life. We should think about it often.

Imagine if you were on a long road trip with your family. Let's say, for example, you were moving from Chicago to San Francisco. As you traveled through the western plains and mountains, wouldn't it be strange if you never thought about or talked about where you were going? It might even be more than just strange—it might be dangerous. If you didn't keep San Francisco in mind, you might get distracted and take some wrong turns and end up somewhere else entirely.

All Saints' Day is a privileged moment for all of us to remember where we are going. To think about our true, everlasting home. To look forward to getting there. To be encouraged by knowing that others have successfully made the journey and to ask for the help of their prayers. To let the comforting promise of Jesus strengthen our hearts and minds amid life's troubles:

 Do not let your hearts be troubled. You have faith in God; have faith also in me. In my Father's house


there are many dwelling places. If there were not, would I have told you that I am going to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back again and take you to myself, so that where I am you also may be.

—John 14:1–3

A GIFT OF MERCY


The existence of heaven is a dogma of our Catholic faith, as we publicly profess every Sunday when we pray: "We look for the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come." This means that God has revealed it to us—he wants us to know about it, to think about it. Being able to hope securely in heaven, to know for certain that heaven is real, is one of the great gifts of God's mercy.

It was also one of Jesus' favorite topics. "Enter by the narrow gate," he once told his disciples,

 For the gate is wide and the way is easy, that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard, that leads to life, and those who find it are few.

—Matthew 7:13–14

Jesus often refers to "rewards" that his followers will receive in heaven: "Rejoice and be glad," he admonished those of his followers who would suffer persecution, "for your reward will be great in heaven." And in his parables he reveals what he wants to be able to say to us right after we die:

 Well done, my good and faithful servant ... Come, share your master's joy.

—Matthew 25:21

He even made sure that "heaven" was included in the fundamental Christian prayer—*twice*: "Our Father, who art in *heaven* ... Thy will be done, on earth as it is in *heaven* ..." Jesus Christ came to establish a Kingdom of peace, joy, and meaning that begins here on earth, but has its ultimate fulfillment in heaven.



To describe what heaven is like, he uses comparisons of wedding celebrations, magnificent banquets and feasts, earthly experiences that we can all relate to and appreciate for their joy.

HEAVEN OR HELL?

Jesus speaks of the “rewards” of heaven because he won’t force anyone to go there; we have a role to play in making that happen—it’s not automatic. He issues everyone an invitation, but he leaves each one free to accept or reject it.

- When we accept it, welcoming the offer of his friendship and persevering in that friendship until we die, we give him the joy of our everlasting companionship in heaven—where we receive the super-abundant fulfillment of all our deepest desires.
- But we can also reject the invitation to live in communion with God. We can prefer making our own rules for right and wrong and inventing our own brand of happiness, instead of humbly and wisely accepting God’s grace and following his commandments.
- If we persist in rejecting the invitation of his friendship up to our death, then God will honor our choice. He will leave us free to live outside of heaven for all eternity. That is called hell.

Some people think that the existence of hell is impossible, that it contradicts God’s infinite mercy. Those people have not thought deeply enough about it.

THE “PUNISHMENTS” OF HELL

Jesus uses the word “Gehenna” to refer to hell. This word has its origin in a kind of ancient garbage dump outside Jerusalem, where not only trash, but even dead bodies—both animal and human—were disposed of. A continuous, smoldering fire consumed the refuse. It was a horrid place. The word Jesus uses for hell calls it to mind and helps explain what he means by describing hell as a place “where their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched” (Mark 9:48).

Heaven is the state of unending fulfillment that comes from living in perfect communion with God. Hell is the state of unending frustration that comes from living in utter separation from God. Both possibilities come from the simple fact that God is not a tyrant, but a loving, merciful

father, who will allow his children to abandon their true home if they wish, as the prodigal son did in the famous parable, but who will never hesitate to welcome them back with open arms.

As strange as it may sound to our post-modern ears, hell is just as much a sign of God’s mercy and love as heaven is. If there were no possibility of hell, there would be no possibility of heaven either. Both depend on love. To enjoy friendship with God, we have to be free to enter into that friendship, which means God refuses to force us—if he forced us, it would no longer be a relationship of love. Here is how the Catechism explains it:

“We cannot be united with God unless we freely choose to love him. But we cannot love God if we sin gravely against him, against our neighbor or against ourselves ... To die in mortal sin without repenting and accepting God’s merciful love means remaining separated from him for ever by our own free choice. This state of definitive self-exclusion from communion with God and the blessed is called “hell.”

—CCC, 1033

CONCLUSION: A CALL TO LIVE WISELY AND LOVE WELL

Death, Judgment, Heaven, and Hell—the Four Last Things, as Catholic tradition calls them. Jesus talked about these topics all the time. The only way we can live life deeply and fully is by living life in light of them. And that’s why the Church never hesitates to remind us of them, whether by offering special graces when we pray for the dead on All Souls’ Day, or by bringing us together to worship our Savior and honor those who have been saved on All Saints’ Day.

In the conference, we will unpack two doctrines closely related to the Four Last Things, Purgatory and indulgences, but for now, let’s take some time to prayerfully reflect on our final destination, and the difference that knowing about it can make while we get there. The following questions and quotations may help your meditation.



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CONFERENCE

UNDERSTANDING PURGATORY AND INDULGENCES

INTRODUCTION

Purgatory. The word conjures up vivid imagery. Some people associate it with the Dark Ages, with the supposed fears and ignorance of medieval superstition. *Purgatory*. It can make us shiver. It's a topic many people would rather skip over. In this conference, we will try to dispel those irrational feelings by clarifying what this doctrine, and the related doctrine of indulgences, really means.

MYSTERIOUS—BUT REAL

The lives of the saints are full of references to purgatory. St. Catherine of Genoa wrote a whole treatise on it called "The Fire of Love." Many saints have been given visions of the souls in purgatory, visions that inspired them to pray for those souls and to do penance for them, and to practice virtue more energetically in order to avoid having to pass through those painful precincts themselves.

And the official teaching of the Church has always agreed with the saints' experiences. The existence of purgatory is no medieval invention; it is an article of faith, a truth revealed by God and officially taught by the Church.

It was common practice from the very beginning of the Church to offer prayers for the souls of the dead, and to celebrate the Eucharist for their benefit, a practice that would make no sense without purgatory.

In the fourth century St. Cyril of Jerusalem was already referring to this practice as a long-standing tradition when he wrote about the prayers of the Mass:

☞ ... we pray for the holy fathers and bishops who have fallen asleep, and in general for all who have fallen asleep before us, in the belief that it is a great benefit to the souls on whose behalf the supplication is offered ...

—CCC, 1371

The Bible too supports the doctrine of purgatory, although it doesn't mention the word explicitly.

- 2 Maccabees 12:46, for example, explains how Judas Maccabeus "made atonement for the dead, that they might be delivered from their sin."
- St. Paul also makes allusion to purgatory in 1 Corinthians 3, when he discusses the judgment that comes after death. He writes:

☞ The Day which dawns in fire will make it clear and the fire itself will test the quality of each person's work ... the one whose work is burnt down will suffer the loss of it, though he himself will be saved; he will be saved as someone might expect to be saved from a fire.

The implication is clear: for some souls, purification after death will be necessary before they can enter heaven.

The Bible, the constant teaching and practice of the Church, the experience of the saints—all these clearly affirm the existence of purgatory. But what exactly is purgatory, and what does it have to do with our lives here and now?

HEAVENLY REHAB

One spiritual writer has explained purgatory with a memorable image.

- Imagine that a young man leaves home to go off and fight in a war.
- He is gone for a long time, and when he finally returns, his clothes are tattered, he's half-starved, he is caked with mud and covered with blood, his head is bandaged, both his legs are broken and one arm is in a homemade sling. But, he is alive, and he has made his way home.
- Will he go right into the dining room where the family is having a birthday dinner? No. He is not fit for such a celebration, and he wouldn't even want to make an appearance in his unpleasant condition.
- He has to go and get cleaned up, and the doctors will have to look at him and set those broken bones




and change those bandages, and he'll have to get his strength back, and he'll have to undergo physical therapy to recover from his injuries.

- The process may take a while, and it will probably be uncomfortable, even painful. It may take a full year before he's 100% healthy and able to participate fully in family affairs. But in the end, he'll take his rightful seat at the family feast.

That temporary but necessary recovery period is like purgatory.

- Earthly life is a spiritual battle.
- Our selfishness and sins not only offend God (the offense that confession removes), but they also do damage to our souls.
- They form and deepen spiritual habits and attitudes that are contrary to the gospel—they wound us, spiritually speaking.
- And that damage needs to be repaired; those wounds need to be healed.
- Every last scrap of selfishness and sinfulness has to be removed, or *purified* (that's what the word "purgatory" literally means—"purification") before we can be free to enjoy heaven, where there simply is no selfishness to limit or tarnish the everlasting joy of perfect love.

This image helps us understand the Catechism's short definition of purgatory:

 All who die in God's grace and friendship, but still imperfectly purified, are indeed assured of their eternal salvation; but after death they undergo purification, so as to achieve the holiness necessary to enter the joy of heaven. The Church gives the name Purgatory to this final purification ... which is entirely different from the punishment of the damned.

—CCC, 1030–1031

One modern Catholic philosopher has explained it with a simple syllogism:

- At the moment of death, most of us are not completely purified of all selfishness, even if we are living in God's grace and friendship.

- But in heaven, we will be completely free of selfishness, completely sanctified.
- Therefore, for most of us, there must be some additional change, some purification, between death and heaven. This is purgatory.

The existence of purgatory, then, is not only Biblical, historical, and affirmed by the Church's Magisterium, but it is also quite logical.

THE JOYS OF PURGATORY

But that still doesn't explain what actually happens in purgatory, or how long purgatory lasts. On those points the Church has remained silent—there is room for mystery and speculation there. All we know for certain is that our leftover selfishness has to be gotten rid of.

Here on earth we purify our selfishness primarily by our efforts to know, love, and follow Christ more and more each day, through prayer and study, the sacraments, and obedience to God's will.

- The self-centered tendencies of our fallen human nature make that hard, at times—it's hard to be patient, to forgive, to resist temptation, to persevere in doing what's right in the face of mockery or ridicule.
- Being faithful to our Christian vocation even through that kind of suffering is painful, but it purifies our love and makes us grow in virtue.

The souls in purgatory somehow have to go through the same process, but since they have died and are no longer capable of doing so on their own initiative and by their own efforts, their purification is what theologians call "passive."

- This doesn't mean that it's pain-free.
- Instead, it's like the physical therapist who wisely forces his patient to go way beyond his comfort zone: the pain is much worse than what the patient would have experienced if left to himself, but the end result is worth it.

This is one reason we can call the suffering of purgatory a "fire of mercy:" through it God in his merciful goodness creates a way to heal and cleanse his beloved children after they die, so that they can experience forever the full joy of heaven.



You have probably already realized the difference between purgatory and hell. Purgatory is painful, because overcoming selfishness is always painful. Yet it is also joyful, because the souls in *purgatory* know that eventually they will be able to enjoy the glory of heaven—there is a divine purpose to their sufferings. In hell there is no such release to look forward to, no meaningful purpose, and those who are there know it.

ASKING THE CHURCH FOR A FAVOR

Understanding the doctrine of purgatory also helps us understand the doctrine of indulgences—a doctrine that has been frequently misunderstood and often abused, but that doesn't mean we need to throw it away. The abuse doesn't take away the use, as the old saying goes.

An indulgence is simply a favor granted by the Church—to which, remember, Christ gave the “keys of the Kingdom” and the “power to bind and loose on earth and in heaven” (cf. Matthew 16).

By means of this favor, the Church applies the grace of Christ and the saints to repair the damage and heal the wounds caused by our personal sins. In other words, instead of having to suffer through the necessary purification oneself, indulgences apply the suffering already lovingly undergone by Christ and the saints to the healing of our wounded souls.

Indulgences can't free souls from hell, nor can they forgive the guilt of sin (our repentance and God's mercy do that), but they can “speed up” (so to speak) the purification process for ourselves here on earth and for souls in purgatory.

The Church's tradition of granting indulgences is yet another one of the many signs of God's mercy. Through them, he gives us a concrete way to continue expressing our love—to continue doing something useful—for those who have died and may be suffering in purgatory.

There are two types of indulgences: partial, which repair some of the damage caused by sin, or plenary, which repair all of the damage.

THE EASE OF COLLECTING INDULGENCE

How do we obtain indulgences? There are three general ways, and numerous specific ways. First let's go through the general ways.

A partial indulgence is granted whenever we raise our minds in humble trust to God while performing our duties in life and putting up with life's difficulties (like telling Jesus we love him while we're up late caring for a sick family member).

A partial indulgence is also granted when, prompted by an attitude of faith, we devote ourselves or our goods to the service of brothers and sisters in need (like teaching the catechism to children or giving donations to the poor).

Finally, a partial indulgence is granted when, in a spirit of repentance for sin, we voluntarily abstain from something we like (like drinking water instead of Coke and “offering it up” for the souls in purgatory).

Those are the three general ways. The numerous specific ways of obtaining indulgences include visiting certain holy places or pilgrimage sites, the heartfelt recitation of certain prayers (like the Creed and the Angelus), adoration of the Blessed Sacrament for at least half an hour, the devout reading of the Bible for at least half an hour, devoutly praying the Stations of the Cross, and visiting a cemetery to pray for the dead during the week of All Souls' Day.

These last four can obtain a plenary indulgence when they are accompanied by complete interior detachment from sin, the reception of Holy Communion, a prayer for the pope, and confession sometime during the same week. There are many other ways as well, all of them listed in the official *Handbook of Indulgences, Norms, and Grants*.^[1]

CONCLUSION: HELPING THE FAMILY GET HOME

At first glance, it may seem arbitrary or artificial to attach indulgences to specific prayers or acts of devotion. But it's just one more sign of God's abundant mercy, and of the love that links all members of God's family. After all, it is a great act of love to pray and obtain indulgences for our brothers and sisters in purgatory. Hastening their entry into the glory of heaven certainly qualifies as “loving your neighbor as yourself.” Ignoring them, on the other hand, can be as hard-hearted as ignoring our neighbors here on earth who suffer from hunger or disease.

Our journey to heaven is a family trip. Along the way we may get bruised and battered and dirtied and exhausted, like

[1] Available online here: <http://www.basilica.org/pages/ebooks/Sacred%20Apostolic%20Penitentiary-The%20Enchiridion%20of%20Indulgences.pdf>.



FURTHER READING

If you feel moved to continue reflecting and praying about this theme, you may find the following books helpful:

- *Heaven: The Heart's Deepest Longing*
by Peter Kreeft
- *All You Ever Wanted to Know about Heaven but Were Afraid to Ask*
by Peter Kreeft
- *The Great Divorce*
by C. S. Lewis
- *The Biblical Basis for Purgatory*
by John Salza
- *Fire of Love! Understanding Purgatory*
by St. Catherine of Genoa

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